

Of Tea and Swords

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Summary: Snippets and drabbles concerning our leading lady and the men around her. Based mostly upon the various media across the Hakuouki franchise, in short, anything that comes to mind. Rated T to be safe.

1. What Are You Fighting For?

Pairing: Hijikata X Chizuru

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><p>"What are you fighting for?"<p>

Those words had been uttered by an enemy combatant that he had felled with his katana. They were the Shinsen-Gumi, the guardians of an old and broken age, defeated by sheer numbers and one other word: technology. Katana, spears, kodachi, bows and arrows, they lost to cannons, guns, and whatever the enemy had against themâ€|

So, what were they fighting for?

They knew about the corruption of the Bakufu, but they also knew that those who fought on the Emperor's side did so only because they wanted power for themselves. They knew that they could not stand a chance against the changing of the tides, especially when the age of the sword was endingâ€|

What were they fighting for, and why did they continue such a fruitless attempt?

The answer was right before his eyes, whenever he looked out his window, looking at their headquarters full to the brim with warriors going about their daily activities, practicing in the dojo, doing the laundry, working in the kitchens for their next mealâ€| They were fighting to save one anotherâ€|

They said that they, the Shinsen-Gumi were just a group of leaderless ronin without masters, they were wrong. They were in the Shinsen-Gumi because they were the masters of their own fate, bound to one anotherâ€| Who was he kidding?

He knew that they were gaining in power only because there was no one who dared to step into the center stage, out of fear of death, or out of fear of the Ishin-shishi. They were right there where all the action was because they wanted to be there, not out of duty, but because they were lucky to be able to seize that chanceâ€|

But what was he fighting for?

The Shinsen-Gumi? Yes, of course, but what else? He lived for the fight, but what else was there?

His men, his brothers, his ideals, they were all poetic reasons to fight in that chaotic time, surely, there would be something else?

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><p>Ken wa kioki, kenjutsu wa satsujin no jutsuâ€| [The sword is a weapon of murder; kenjutsu is the skill used to kill others]_

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><p>Whoever said those words wereâ€| absolutely right. In a different age, in a different time, all they were doing were merely just killing men, men who had families that they wished to protect, ideals just like they didâ€|<p>

"Excuse me, Hijikata-san," a soft, feminine voice entered his mind, interrupting his internal ruminations, and he saw the shoji door to his room move slightly, allowing the sight of pink and light beige-grey to enter into his peripheral vision. "I've brought some tea for youâ€|"

He smiled and told her to enter. She was beautiful, that girl, painfully so. Perhaps the others could not see it, but her beauty lied not only upon her clear, white complexion, or those large doe-like eyes of honey, no, her beauty came from her strength that saw her through every possible adversity thrown against her, from her short imprisonment in their hands, to the pain of knowing that her father would never be foundâ€| Her strength soon become theirs, through that smile that she would give so freely, and him, more so than the others.

Her small hands delivered the tray she had been holding onto his table, and as she handed him the cup of tea, he noticed that their hands had touched ever so slightly. Immediately she blushed and started to turn away, but he lifted her chin with his free hand and said, "Arigatou, Chizuruâ€|"

With those words came a light kiss on her forehead on his part. It was not proprietary by their customs, but he did not care, for they were alone at the time, and besides, the shock of this gesture would surely ensure her silence.

True to her nature, she quickly moved away from him and bowed to him slightly before escaping into her own room, the redness of her cheeks ever so obvious as every second passed. He had to admit that he would be stooping to Souji's level by doing this, but... when it came to words of _that_ nature; he would leave it to Harada and not himself...

He watched her from the window, blundering and blustering her way back to her room, all the way across the other side of their headquarters, and he smiled...

Yes, there was no way to deny it...

She was what he was fighting for.

2. Often Like the Full Moon

Pairing: Harada X Chizuru

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><p>She was young girl thrust into the world of menâ€| quite literally, he might add.<p>

Due to the nature of their headquarters, which was overflowing with scores and scores of men, it was logically decided that she was to continue to be disguised as a boy, and was kept close to the leaders of their organization for her own protection. Hence, there were only a few people who knew her to be a woman, and sometimes, he would like to keep it that way. The times they were living in brought muchâ€| stress to themselves and their men, and not many were of the high honor and moral strength that they claim to possesâ€|

She was too precious to him, and the rest of his companions to be tainted by those hands.

However, as a man, he knew that there were times when women were rather irritable, cranky and were just not in good moods even if they were angels like she was usually, and times like that came around as often as the full moon did. Coming from a family of mostly sisters, older and younger, he knew that exact reason and usually knew what was going on. Heisuke, like the rest of Japan's highly ignorant and insensitive men, did not.

"Neâ€| Chizuru, are you alright?" Heisuke asked Chizuru on one such day. It was right in the middle of summer, and there was a slight furrow of her brow that indicated a mix of exhaustion, subtle pain and unexplained hostility that she was not known to have.

She forced a smile as she looked towards Heisuke, the youngest among the Captains of the Shinsen-Gumi, only a few summers older than she was. "Yes, Heisuke-kun, I'm fine," she replied. Even the greatest fool could notice the strain of her voice and the effort used to mask it.

The boy, however, did not understand one bit and continued to press on. Concerned as he was for her, he justâ€| Chizuru remained silent, being too well-mannered to kick Heisuke in the shin or glare at him

to his death (like what Shinpachi and Harada did).

Luckily, Hijikata was a merciful man and said to her, "Chizuru, you are free from your duties today. You look unwell."

It was rather blunt, but it was a reprieve that she had badly needed. Sannan shook his head the very moment she left. "Women are strong creatures, are they not?" he asked softly. "It is already torture to bear suchâ€¦ annoyance every now and then, and even childbirth..."

Hijikata nodded as he took a sip of the tea that she had just made before she left the hall. "My sisters would shout at me for no apparent reason," he told the others, knowing precisely what is on their minds. "Have a guard around her tonightâ€¦ Harada, you will have the first watch."

He nodded at his superior. Indeed, no detail could escape Hijikata's keen amethyst eyes. The Rasetsu would surelyâ€¦ He shuddered even to think about it. "I'll make sure that she's safe," he replied. "Don't worry."

Hijikata nodded. He knew that there was no other warrior amongst them who cared for Chizuru more than Harada, and knew well enough that that man would place anyâ€¦ sensitivities aside for her. He just hoped that the girl would not notice the increased security around her or she would do somethingâ€¦ unpredictable. "Let's hope it works," he prayed quietly. If anything happened to her, he would not know what would happen to Harada and all of themâ€¦

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><p>Night had fallen, and the discomfort only increased for her. It was one of those times when she utterly hated to be a woman, mostly because she got the worst cramps and aches while other women seemed to breeze through those few daysâ€¦

"Chizuru, can I come in?" his voice came through her door and she gave an affirmative sound, too tired to even leave her futon. Slowly he moved the shoji doors aside and entered her room, taking a steaming beverage in his hands. "You look down," he added, placing a hand upon the crown of her head. "Here, drink this,"

She readily accepted the fragrant-smelling beverage and took it sip after thanking him softly. Was that honey and green tea she tasted? Strangely, she actually felt betterâ€¦ "Harada-san, arigatou," she thanked, her previously furrowed brow instantly replaced with what seemed to be a fraction of her usual smile.

"Don't thank me," he said with a chuckle. "Thank Hijikata-san. He's the one who had to live with three sisters." The Oni-Fukuchou had been the youngest of six children, and was often left in the care of his teenaged sisters as a child. "Heisukeâ€¦ on the other handâ€¦"

The very mention of Heisuke's name reddened her cheeks immediately. "I must apologize to him," she said, remembering how she had treated him earlier that day.

"Chizuru, you've done nothing wrong," he said, retrieving the cup

from her. "Heisuke's just bothered you at the wrong place at the wrong timeâ€|"

It was strangeâ€| They were talking about herâ€| and still they wereâ€|

There was no awkwardness between them, and he wasâ€| smiling as he had always been with her. "Harada-sanâ€|" she called, looking into his eyes that bordered upon the shade of amber.

"Shhâ€|" he silenced her with the slight touch of his finger upon her lips. "Just get some sleep, Chizuru, you'll be fine in the morning, hopefully." He watched her drop back onto her futon and even helped her to cover the blankets over her small body. "I'll be here until you fall asleep, if you don't mind."

Chizuru yawned. "Aaâ€|" she murmured, and surrendered into sleep that quickly, not realizing that Hijikata had silently joined them, his katana already unsheathed.

The Rasetsu were already approaching, but Chizuru would not remember that night when Harada and Hijikata defended quickly cut down the Rasetsu that had caught the scent of a sudden surge of blood, and came swarming towards her room, their bodies quickly disposed of by Shimada and Yamazaki.

The next morning, they quickly changed her rooms to a place far enough from where the Rasetsu were, and life continued just as normal.

3. Where His True Strength Lies

Pairing: Saito X Chizuru.

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><p>HAN: If this seems strange to you, this is part of Saito's route in the original game, and yes, Saito did drink the Ochimizu. He was... shall we say, horribly brutalized by Kazama during the Battle of Toba-Fushimi.<p>

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><p>Their blades crossed as he fought the leader of the Oni of the West, Kazama Chikage, and made sure that he was able to throw his opponent off balance so that he could recover from the heavy strike that he had just made.<p>

"You are a mere dog of a leaderless organization," Kazama mocked. "Do you think that even after you have consumed the Ochimizu, you would have the strength to defeat me?"

He was not one to be easily put down by those harsh words that his enemy had spewed. They meant nothing to a man who had to kill him; because he had so many things left that he had to do. "I do," he replied, and delivered a cut across the Oni's right arm.

"Impossible," Kazama replied. "You were the one who drank the

Ochimizu to even try to have a chance to defeat me, were you not? If you could not do so the first time, you will _never _defeat me."

He did not even need to think about the words he would use against those words. "I am a different man now," he exclaimed, parrying an almost aerial assault with his katana. "I have already found my answerâ€|"

Kazama raised an eyebrow. "And what answer might that be?"

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><p>"What is the meaning of true strength?"<p>

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><p>In his lifetime before he had come to the Shinsen-Gumi, formerly known as the disciples of the Shieikan dojo, he had not known the very meaning of that word, despite his previous notions. Had it been the ability to fell an enemy in combat? He had killed the son of a hatamoto, and still, he had been looked down upon as if he had been a criminal, all because of the fact that he was left-handedâ€|

In knowing Kondou Isami along with Hijikata Toshizou, with the students of their run-down dojo, he thought that he had finally found those whose strength came from within themselves, and amongst themselves. Theirs was a circle of companions who never asked who they were before, and where they came from, and only what they could bring into their own future, how they could help each other reach their goals. Together with this band of "bumbling idiots from Edo" as Hijikata would reminiscently put it, they had found a place amongst each other, and they fought for one another, placing the Shinsen-Gumi forever into the annals of time for their epitomizing of loyalty, brotherhood, and the honoring of Bushidoâ€|

But that alone was not true strengthâ€| The Shinsen-Gumi, if they would be famous or infamous hundreds of years into the future, was fighting a losing war no matter how they held onto one anotherâ€| It did not seem so in the early days because they could not see ten minutes into the future, and fate was not always on their side.

True strengthâ€| he knew, resided in the form of her likeness, a young girl who grew beside them as their power increased in Kyoto, and emerged a woman when their majesty was warriors in the time of guns and cannons waned.

She could not fight, and she could barely defend herself against perhaps the most basic of opponents, but her strength lied not in the her combat prowess. It took the shape of her furrowed brow when she was aiding their wounded, the slight curve of her lips as she was cooking for the dozens of men, the happy sigh when she had finished sweeping the autumn's leaves in the headquartersâ€| But that was only the surface, the bare surface of a young woman disguised as a young man working as the page-boy of the leaders of the Shinsen-Gumiâ€|

_She had, and always will have, a different way to see their current situation. Escape was seen as a chance to fight again, the weakness

of humans before her, a high-born daughter of a great house of Oni, was seen as faith in one another, and she had believed in them so deeply, and even in his ownâ€¦ conundrums, she could see a different side for him, a side that he never could have noticed with his own eyes._

"Even if the world no longer needs katana or spears, the world still needs you, Saito-san," she told him that night when they were moving towards Koufu Castle. As always, he had remained silent, raising a questioning eyebrow at her words. "I know this, because I know that Saito-san's katana is not one that murders, it is one that saves livesâ€¦ You saved me at Ikedaya, have you not?"

Although he had not changed his expression one bit when she said those words, his katana still held high in his left hand, Saito knew that he could no longer see her in the same light as he once didâ€¦ No longer could he see her as a part of the Shinsen-Gumi, a non-combatant, to be protected upon orders because she had ties to one of their most protected secretsâ€¦ She had spoken further, telling him that although the world no longer needed samurai bearing katana, they still needed the souls of the samurai, to continue fightingâ€¦

This womanâ€¦ he was sure to guard her future, because through her eyes, through thatâ€¦ quaint little mind of hers, he had once again found the path that he was to tread upon, and for that, he was ready to give her his life if need be. It is because through her, he had discovered his answer.

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><p>"The world may change, it may no longer need samurai in the age of guns and cannons, but, there are those who still need my katana, and I will fight to my last breath for them, whoever they may be."<p>

Behind him, Sanosuke, Shinpachi and Heisuke were all smiling, but when he looked to the left, across the room, he saw her, smiling, but with tears running down her faceâ€¦ What a strange woman she was, smiling and crying at the same timeâ€¦ It did not matter. He would dry her tears after he had killed this beast who had made a mockery of him and his brothers for far too long.

"Go get him, Hajime-kun!" Heisuke cheered on, and he nodded.

Shifting his weight upon his left foot, he propelled himself forwards in a speed that the already injured Oni could not keep up with, and thrust his katana straight into Kazama's heart.

He had his friends, and the woman that believed in him, the woman that he had sworn to protectâ€¦ That was where his strength truly lied.

4. The Western Gown: Prologue

The Western Gown: Prologue

Pairing: Hijikata X Chizuru

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><p>"Toshi, there isâ€| a favor that I would like to ask you," Kondou said to Hijikata one afternoon.<p>

Hijikata looked at Kondou and sighed. Whenever Kondou would speak to him using such a tone, it usually meant that he would have to take his only superior's place in the task that he was dreading to attend to, like dealing with politicians when they were supposed to fight to the last man. "What would that be, Kondou-san?" he asked, knowing full well the answer that he would receive.

Kondou scratched his chin and answered, "The Westerners who have supplied our latest shipments of weapons invited me to some strange event where I must take a female guest along and danceâ€|"

The Oni-Fukuchou raised an eyebrow. He had heard of those Western gatherings before, where apparently there would be music and dancing, and it was where all the similarities ended. Both men and women attended these events, and they were required to dance with one another after a sumptuous dinnerâ€| That was if hearsay could be trusted. "You want me to go in your stead," Hijikata said, closing his eyes in deep thought. "And who would I bring? We cannot possibly dress Yamazaki as a womanâ€|"

"That's easy," Kondou said, knowing that there was no way that Hijikata would refuse him. "Just bring Yukimura along. I'm sure that she'll be thrilled to join you. Toshi, do you really want to dress Yamazaki as a woman?"

Hijikataâ€| did not know how to react to those words. There was a little problem thoughâ€| "Kondou-san, have you forgotten that Chizuru is supposed to be known as a male?" he asked. "The Westerners that sold those weapons to us might have sold the same ones to the Satcho faction, we cannot riskâ€|"

However, Kondou would not have "no" for an answer. "Toshi, not many in this world even know that you have a page in the first place. Besides, I heard from the boys that Yukimura is an unrecognizable beauty if she dons women's clothing. Think of it as a chance for her to enjoy being a woman again. She has been in her disguise for close to years now, the poor dear."

Kondou did not detect it, but Hijikata's gaze was now focused upon the girl in question, who could be seen sweeping up the fallen leaves of autumn. Heisuke and Souji were patiently waiting for her with a basket of sweet potatoes which they would cook using the leaves as fuel. He was there when Heisuke, Harada and Shinpachi jokingly forced her to wear the garb of a geisha, and he had to admit, she looked beautiful, by any single man's standardsâ€| However, that was not to say that she was not pleasing to the eye in her current likenessâ€|

Hijikata knew that he had no other choice. "I cannot go against your orders, can I?" he asked Kondou, crossing his arms. The rules of the Shinsen-Gumi were written by him, and there was no way he would commit Seppuku by defaulting the rules that he himself had created. "When is the event held?"

Kondou's expression immediately brightened. "In two months time, the venue is yet to be decided."

"Two months?"

"Yes, well, Yamazaki-kun here will provide you with the details. I'll let Shinpachi and the rest to deal with the girl, shall I? We should let them in with the fun as well."

5. The Western Gown: Part 1

The Western Gown: Part 1

Pairing: Hijikata X Chizuru

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><p>It was a normal morning for Chizuru. She rose quite early, and started with her chores. She cooked breakfast with Saito's help, brewed tea, and swept up the leaves in the courtyard. It was a rather routine day, and there was nothing unusual. By early afternoon, she had finished all her duties and retired to her room for some rest.<p>

However, it was the perfection of the day that scared her. She was in the headquarters of the Shinsengumi, and on an everyday basis, there should be one of Souji's pranks on the mildest threats, and turns of events that would change the tide of war completely on the largest scale. Nothing of both sorts had happened, not even those in between. Chizuru, who had gotten used to everyday turmoil among these men, was starting to anticipate something to happen in one way or other.

"Chizuru-chan, can we come in?" Shinpachi's voice suddenly rang from the exterior of her room. She opened the door and found him, Harada, Heisuke and Souji all at her door, filing into her room one by one with a certain look on their faces. "Have you finished your work for today?"

"Yes, I have," she answered as cheerfully as always. "What brings all of you here?" she asked in return as Gen-san came in as well, obviously acting as their chaperone. Even though it was broad daylight, and even if she was supposed to be disguised as a young man, Gen-san had still insisted he come along in case anything happened. Ah, such was the virtue of the elders of a generation. They would never trust the young in their intentions, even if it was to deliver a prelude of a surprise that they were sure would make Chizuru very, very happy as well.

Chizuru looked at the four men before her nervously. They had cornered her in her room and they were now smiling from ear to ear. They told her that they were on orders to bring her to the tailor's, but they did not say why, and not only that, even Gen-san seemed to be in with whatever mischief that they had planned for her. "Chizuru-chan, if you would be so kind to come with us" Souji said in his usual tone that hidden death threats aplenty. "We have a surprise for you in the city"

She had been among the men of the Shinsengumi long enough to be able

to tell that it would be something more than a mere trip to the city. "Inoe-san?" she squeaked, looking towards the wise warrior for guidance.

Gen-san merely smiled at her. "They're just doing Toshi's bidding. Yukimura-kun. I can assure you that they are not up to their usual antics," he explained. "You had better go now indeed, or you will be late for the appointment!" He knew what was planned, and privately took the same stand as that of the younger men around him, more or less because he was utterly _tired_ of the way Hijikata and the girl were so slow in realizing their emotions for one another, emotions that were so clear to those around them. Perhaps this strange and foreign gathering would give them the push they needed, or so he thought.

However, that did not answer her question at all. "Why would I need to go to a tailor?" she asked Harada quickly ushered her out the front gates of their headquarters. Her question roused even more snickers from all of them. "Please! I have a right to know, do I not?"

"You'll know when you get there," Shinpachi said with a grin, leading their little group towards a left turn. "Just so you know, Chizuru, _someone_ is heading there as well!"

Shinpachi would have said further if Heisuke had not reached up high and knocked Shinpachi on the head. "Don't spoil the surprise, Shinpat-san you baka!" Heisuke scolded. "You're going to ruin it for us too, you know!"

Shinpachi quickly apologized, and volunteered to remain silent until they arrived at their destination. "I guess I'll have to hold you to your word, Shinpachi," Souji teased, raising his katana from its saya ever so slightly with his thumb. However, his words held no true weight, as even Chizuru knew that he did not mean to kill any of them at all. She herself was a testament to that fact, when he saved her from the Oni Kazama Chikage during the Ikedaya Incident, instead of killing her for being in his way.

"Maa! maa!" Harada tried to calm them all down. "The people around us will think that we're crazy with the amount of noise we're making." He was right, people at the side of the streets were staring at them rather intently, with furrowed brows and confused expressions. They were lucky that they were off duty and did not need to wear their light green haori, or else, the Shinsen-Gumi would be known as total clowns besides being the Bakufu's top killers.

Half an hour later, all five of them managed to reach the tailor's shop and what was inside amazed them. It seemed that this tailor specialized in Western clothing, because they were all Chizuru could see. She quickly glanced through the men suits, which were more or less similar to one another, and then, the gowns that were worn by women came into view. They were made in every hue, wholly different from the kimono of Japan. Some of them had trimmings with strange little holes that made intricate patterns at the hems of the gowns and were mostly white! others were made of silk and materials that looked like silk, but no matter what material they were made out of, it can be sure that they were strange to her eyes because the bottom part of the gowns were shaped like bells! How was one supposed to wear clothes like that?

"Finally, you're here," a familiar voice broke Chizuru's train of thought altogether. She looked around the shop once again and found Hijikata standing there with his left arm raised along with Yamazaki by his side. "I'm now stiff all over thanks toâ€¦"

A medium-sized man popped up from behind Hijikata and chastised him. "If you would be more patient, Hijikata-san, the measurements won't take such a long time." The man was most definitely Western, with light-colored hair and grey eyes. He was perhaps around his middle-ages, but spoke Japanese like a native.

Hijikata could not give a proper comeback, and decided to be reserved to his fate. There were other matters to attend to anyways. "Chizuru, do you know why we are here?" he asked Chizuru, who was looking very, very confused. In fact, it seemed that no one even cared to tell her why they were all at a Western tailor's shop at all. Souji had his trademark, cat-like smirk which appeared whenever he was up to no good, while Harada, Heisuke and Shinpachi wereâ€¦ well, they were up to their usual antics, which could not amount to anything better than Souji was capable of.

Yamazaki gave Hijikata a knowing look and cleared his throat, indicating that he would like to speak. Heisuke, however, decided to take that as a cue to exclaim, "You're going to some Western ceremony with Hijikata-san!" However, Chizuru showed no sign of elation whatsoever, clearly infatuated with Hijikata as she was.

The tailor chuckled at Chizuru's response, which was to quickly look at his and Hijikata's direction for explanation. "Child, a ball is where people gather at a hall to socialize with another, and usually, dancing is involved," the tailor explained.

His words were carefully studied by Hijikata. It would be a great opportunity to know who the other customers of the Westerners that invited them were, if "socializing" was the aim of that event. As far as he knew, the Westerners cared only for making money, and cared little for the allegiances of their customersâ€¦ It would be a good opportunity to determine the armed strength of the opponents to the Shinsen-Gumi, if there were any, of course.

"Dâ€¦ dancing?" Chizuru asked aloud, causing Hijikata to return his focus onto her. Aside from her brief stint as a geisha (which luckily for her, did not involve any form of dancing at all), she had no experience whatsoever when it came to dancing.

"Why yes, child," the tailor added, the excitement in him was clearly rising to great heights with each passing moment. "Men and women would dance together, and it is an ultimately beautiful sight to see!"

The tailor's last sentence produced several kinds of reactions. The first one came from Hijikata, whose violet eyes widened immediately upon hearing those words; the second was from Chizuru, who blushed at the sheer thought of the notion, and the third one was a uniformed one where Shinpachi, Heisuke, Harada and Souji all tried to contain large bouts of laughter.

"Danceâ€¦ together?" Chizuru and Hijikata asked the tailor at the same time, and the four behind them were unable to control their

laughter, even Yamazaki raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, how stupid of me," the tailor scolded himself, slapping himself on the forehead. "You wouldn't know a thing about our dances!" A highly awkward silence soon followed, and they were all looking at each other, waiting for someone to come up with a solution. "I know!" he said after much thought. "I could teach the both of you!"

They had no choice but to agree to the tailor's kind offer. "I thank you humbly," Hijikata told the man with a short bow, and made to leave as soon as his measurements were all taken down, however, before he left, he turned towards Chizuru and said, "I will wait for you at the headquarters. Make sure that the four of them get you back safely."

Chizuru nodded without saying a word, seeing Hijikata off with a smile that he had returned as well.

"Now then, an evening dress it is for the young lady," the tailor said and got his measuring tape ready. "Now, my dear, would you please stand up straight and lift your right arm?"

Chizuru came back from the tailor's shop exhausted and dizzy. "Who would've thought that Westerners had to move and spin around in circles when they dance?" she asked Yamazaki, who was to be her escort back to the headquarters. However, that was the least of her troubles. She learnt that in Western dances, the man would hold a woman by her waist and hand, and women always started the dance on the right foot!

"It would be good to learn the cultures of other nations," Yamazaki replied. "It is an opportunity that many do not have." There was much that Japan had to learn from the current superpowers of the world, Russia, America, France, England and the like, and it was not only in the form of warfare and nation-building, but also at the finer aspects as well. "Besides, this operation is more than a social call. Hijikata intends to discover more about our weapons suppliers."

"I'll do my best," Chizuru said. She was no fool, she knew that Hijikata would not undertake any action without further deliberation. She knew that where there would be weapons, there would be buyers, and most likely, there will be chances that the sellers might have their enemies as customers! "I won't let all of you down."

Yamazaki smiled at her words. "We know that you will," he returned. "Just do your best, and don't push yourself too much." He had seen her during the last few minutes of her training, and although she had no natural grace, he could see the sheer concentration and determination in her eyes! There was no doubt that her progress would surely be quick, so long as she practiced as the tailor had indicated. "Oh, and to keep it between you and me, you are coping to the dance far better than Hijikata-san."

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><p>HAN: I would like to thank eternally wishing and Shourai-sei for their kind reviews. ^.^ They really got be back into writing this. Also, if you would like to see the Western Gown as another fic, do

not hesistate to tell me. Oh, and I have another Hakuouki fic titled: A Good Man, which is a slight crossover with Rurouni Kenshin. Enjoy!~ I would also be open to requests if you want to see certain things to happen. ^.^<p>

6. His to Protect

His to Protect.

Pairing: Souji X Chizuru

* * *

><p>"If you get in my way, I will kill you."<p>

He had said those words to her in the most light-hearted manner although he had purposely made himself to sound serious and severe. Needless to say, that child did the exact opposite. She was a strange one, daring to face death when she shielded his body with hers when he was dueling against Kazama Chikage. She had literally got in his way that night in the Ikedaya, but he knew that if she had not done so, he would be dead. He had not known that his opponent was one of the Oni, a race with far superior abilities than mere humans.

In her days in their growing organization, he knew that she had faced more than just death. Warriors would come back wounded, and she, as the daughter of a doctor that practiced Dutch medicine would help Yamazaki and even Matsumoto to patch them up. Death and decay were normal occurrences in those dark, dark days. She faced all terrors with a smile that could only be hers and hers alone.

She was no warrior like he was, she held a kodachi but had no ability to use it, but he knew that she was stronger than all of them to be able to stand on her own two feet when she herself was suffering in silence. Her father had defected to the other side, and not only that, she had discovered the hard truth that her father had created horrible monsters at the expense of human lives. To live with that truth and to know that there was nothing she could do, he guessed that it must have crushed her heart, and yet, she still woke up every morning, smiling as she did.

"I don't know why Matsumoto-sensei would tell such a horrid joke," he told her just moments after the news that the "weird cold" he was suffering from was tuberculosis. He was already living the last of his days, and still, he did not wish to leave the Shinsen-Gumi. He had pledged his katana and his life to that motley band of brothers headed by Kondou Isami and Hijikata Toshizou, he would never back down so easily. Not to anyone, and not certainly to himself.

"Okita-san," she murmured when he heard those words. Perhaps that there was a chance that she had long suspected that he had this illness. Those who had long cases of colds never often coughed out as much blood as he did, and he realized that she was always near him whenever that happened.

He would not allow her to interrupt him. He could not afford the others to know, especially not Kondou, perhaps even Hijikata. The Shinsen-Gumi had more work to do in these dark times, and he knew

that he could not afford his illness to hinder them. They needed every single form of help that they could get, and if even Chizuru was helping out in her own small ways, why should he not fight to his very last breath?

He smiled, and turned to her. "If anyone starts a rumor that I am dying, I will kill that person without a doubt," he added, looking towards her. Tears were starting to form in her eyes, but she had not yet started to cry. He knew that those tears were real, that they were not tears of pity, but there was nothing that he could do or say to stop his own fate. He left her there in the courtyard, and he heard her first few sobs, causing this dull pain that started to form in his chest, pain that he knew that was in no way aligned with his sickness.

* * *

><p>What had he done to deserve such tears from her?<p>

* * *

><p>"Where will you go?" Hijikata asked her the night before the Shinsen-Gumi was to leave for Koufu Castle. He, on the other hand, was forced to remain in Edo due to his illness. They were there in his room, and they thought that he was sleeping, unable to hear their conversation. "You have a choice whether to come with us, or to stay here with Souji."<p>

Chizuru did not even need time to think. "I will stay here," she told Hijikata. "I will take care of Okita-san until he is well enough to fight again. We will meet you when the time comes."

Hijikata nodded and acknowledged her answer. "I leave Souji in your care, Chizuru," he said. "I've watched this boy grow up before my very eyes. He was a brilliant student of Kondou-san's, and he amazed us with his talent. We are all that he has, apart from his sister. I know that I already ask too much of you by asking you this, but I need you to keep him from changing too much. This war will wound us all, but I fear the time will come when all of us have to pass on, and only he remains. You must keep him company, Chizuru. You are the only one he listens to now; your voice is the only thing that can get inside that thick head of his."

Chizuru was silent, but he felt her hand covering his ever so softly. "Even if you had not asked me, I would do it, Hijikata-san," she replied. "He risked his life to save me from my own brotherâ€¦ I have to repay him, one way or another."

Hijikata smiled at those words. "Souji will always protect those that he loves," he told her. "He also does not do anything unless it goes by his will and desire."

He found it highly ironic that it was Hijikata that said those words to her. It had been running joke for years now, that their Vice-Commander had severe repressed feelings towards the girl. Now, the joke was on him and he knew that Hijikata was always rightâ€¦ In part, it was true, what that self-centered, arrogant man had said, but he did not know the full story. It was Chizuru that had done so much for him that he knew that he could not let her take on his burden with that of her own. Her shoulders were too small for both

their troubles.

Hijikata soon left, and they were once again alone. She was still holding his hand, and the sudden spasms of pain seemed diminished the tighter her grasp was. He soon opened his eyes and she was the first thing that came into his view. "Ne, Chizuru-chan, why is it that every time I wake up, you are the first thing that I see?" he asked her with a smile. There was no doubt that he caught her by surprise. Her face immediately reddened and she said that it was his eyes playing tricks on him. He could see the dark circles around her eyes, they were even deeper than that of Hijikata's whenever he decided to bite off more work than he could chew. "Haven't you slept at all?"

"Iâ€¦ I have," she murmured, but mere seconds later, Yamazaki called her bluff.

"She has been watching over you, and has had little to no sleep at all," he said. "Okita-san, please tell her to get some rest."

Okita smiled and turned towards her. "Chizuru-chan," he called her name. "You should get some rest."

At the end, she knew that this would be a battle that she would surely lose. She had no choice but to return to her room to sleep. It was after she left when Yamazaki spoke again.

"Okita-san, you have orders from Hijikata-san to protect Yukimura," Yamazaki said. "Once you have recovered, you are not to leave her side at all."

Souji understood those words perfectly. "Tell him that I won't," he replied. "I won't even let her leave mine." Those words were part of a promise made to many people. It was one made to himself, and to Hijikata, but most importantly, it was one that he had made to her; that girlâ€¦ that strange, miraculous girl took it upon herself to care for him and he would do the same to her.

He would take whatever she was forced to endure, he would be beside her, no matter what, even in life or in death, because she is his to protect, and not anyone else.

* * *

><p>HAN: This was based off Souji's route in the original Hakuouki game. ^.^ It is quite different from that of the other routes, a little darker than the others as well, but I found that I quite like it. Hijikata's presence is not found in the game, but is completely my creation. I do hope you like this chapter. The second part of the Western Dress will be up next.<p>

7. The Western Gown: Part 2

The Western Gown: Part 2

Pairing: Hijikata X Chizuru

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><p>"So, Hijikata-san," the tailor asked Hijikata one afternoon when his dance-class was over. "What is your relationship with Chizuru-chan?" He was very, very curious about that matter, because Chizuru acted in a wholly different way whenever the raven-haired beauty of a man was with her.<p>

Hijikata just stopped in whatever he was doing. "Chizuru is my page," he replied. That was the first "official" answer. Well, with the tight budget the Shinsen-Gumi has, Chizuru was technically the page of all the commanders of the Shinsen-Gumi, and ran errands that would affect the Shinsen-Gumi as a whole, well, with certain thoughts. She also served as a messenger in during patrolsâ€| She was a non-combatant, in that sense, however, she was an important part of their organization, regardless of how one saw her station amongst them.

The tailor chuckled. "Young man, if you keep lying to yourself, the truth will still be out there in the open," he said. It was highly obvious, that feeling that those on the sidelines could see between them could only be said as 'tension'. The girl was a perfect Japanese child, demure and polite, with an iron strength that was hidden in her grace, while Hijikata, he was a forced to be reckoned with due to his seemingly cold demeanor and the deadly mix of scholarly intellect and his capabilities in warfare. Thus, all that looked upon them (that knew that Chizuru was a girl in the first place), would think that they were a match made in heaven, except themselvesâ€| "You have something in here for that child, admit it." The Westerner even had the courage to poke Hijikata right in the chest. "She's not getting any younger, and so are you. How long do you intend to make her wait for you?"

"It is true that one of my priorities is to protect Chizuru, but it is not in _that_ sense," Hijikata replied with a sigh. "Her father is an important asset in this war, and we need to use her as a key to find him. That is all." Yet another "official" answer, an answer that one could clearly know was a half-truth. Hijikata knew what the tailor was hinting at, but he was unable to give a reasonable answer because he himself did not know it at all. To be entirely honest, Hijikata knew that there was a certain compulsion within him to protect the girl privately, but for what reason, he could not fathom at all.

What he did know, however, was that he noticed that said compulsion first arose when the Oni Kazama Chikage dared to openly walk into their headquarters and try to take Chizuru away from them on the grounds of forcing her to be his wife. From the very depths of his soul, Hijikata wished to defeat that gold-haired enemy of the Shinsen-Gumi to prevent that from happening, and when Chizuru interrupted their duel by going between them, her kodachi unsheathed, he had instinctively put his arms around her, demanding her that she minded her own businessâ€|

The tailor did not press the issue further. Hijikata Toshizou was known as the Oni-Fukuchou of the Shinsen-Gumi, a strict military man whose eyes could kill with a single gazeâ€| Few who knew him dared to challenge him. The tailor, however, did not know Hijikata, hence his daring. "You know, my country was not different from yours," the tailor said. "Our nation was divided as yours, over the issue of slavery, and we fought so bitterly over our differences. My son fled the country with his sweetheart, and now, they are happily living in

Cuba. If they'd waited, he'd be drafted into either side andâ€¦ I may not be able to have two grandsons."

Hijikata understood what the tailor was trying to say. "You're asking me to seize the time given to me," he concluded, looking towards the sakura tree in the courtyard. Strange, as they moved from headquarters to headquarters, there would always be a sakura tree, and she would always be seen near that treeâ€¦ "It is time that I do not have," he added. "With every passing day this nation sinks deeper into violence, our duties are to our country, not to our heartsâ€¦ Not at this time."

"I'm sure that if you're willing to work for it, you'll find a way," the tailor said. "You are a stubborn man, that's what I'll give you. I just want to say that the girl is just as stubborn as you are, in her own way."

That much, Hijikata knew was right. Chizuru had demanded that she stay with them throughout the dangers that they had to face, and they in turn, had come to rely upon her in the smallest of matters that had the greatest of effectsâ€¦ He had taken to drinking the green tea that she had made whenever he was troubled or too drained by his duties, although he was not so sure of how the others saw her.

"Arigatou," he said to the tailor. "We had an interesting conversation today, and I shall keep what you have said in mind."

"You're welcome, Hijikata-san," tailor replied.

Hijikata nodded, and gathered his weapons before he left after a customary parting bow.

Early that evening, Chizuru had come into the shop with Harada. It was the day when she was supposed to try on her dress to see if there were any adjustments that she needed, and it turned out to be more than she had bargained withâ€¦

A similarity was found between the East and the West, for it was that evening when Chizuru realized that it took two people to dress a woman whether said woman was wearing an elaborate kimono or a Western evening gown. However, the Western gown had such strange contraptions that she did not know what to make of it. First, she had wear a white, short object reached only until her knees and exposed her shoulders. She then had to wear a strange contraption that accentuated and defined her waist and bust line over that object, and she swore that it was even moreâ€¦ restrictive than a woman's obi was due to the thin but strong metal strips that it had running down the item vertically. She could literally feel that thing closing around her waist as the tailor's wife tied it together, making it smaller than it already was.

However, the strangest was yet to come. The tailor's wife told her to raise her hands and a strange net was brought over her head. It was actually made of circles that were smaller than at the top and larger at the bottom, held together by wide pieces of cloth and was fastened at the waist. This was the thing that made the gown look like a bell, Chizuru reasoned. Another white piece of cloth was worn over the circular net, and then the tailor brought two pieces of clothing that

seemed to her eyes a mix between white and a very, very light yellow.

"There, you look absolutely beautiful!" the tailor and his wife exclaimed. Outside, Harada remained unmoving, fulfilling his promise to Heisuke and the others that they would not see the dress before any of them did (they wanted the unveiling of Chizuru in a Western gown to be just like the time she was dressed in a kimono â€" a total surprise). "Just one or two stitches here and there, and you'd be fine, Chizuru-chan."

Chizuru looked at herself in the mirror and could not imagine what she had seen, although her hairstyle remained the same. She looked like one of those beautiful women that came into Japan in ships, with their dresses in every color of the sun, her waistline cinched and her breasts raisedâ€| "Usually, young girls like you would wear gowns this color to their first balls," the tailor's wife said rather excitedly. "You, child, are sure to turn many heads your way when you enter the ballroom."

She blushed. Back in Edo, she was rarely considered to be anything special, most likely because she did not get out much, often helping her father in the clinic and getting home to do all the household choresâ€| She rarely had time to even think of dressing up, which could explain why she was so easily accustomed to the routines of the Shinsen-Gumi, having to dress like a male at all times.

Soon, the time came when she had to take it all off, and piece by piece, the original Chizuru returned, dressed in a pink gi and greyish hakama. "Chizuru-chan, would you please tell Hijikata-san that he is to come with you tomorrow for practice?" the tailor told her when the sun had set and she was to return to the Shinsen-Gumi headquarters with Harada. "The two of you need to learn to dance with one another if you are to make an impression on the other guests."

The girl sighed, but she knew that she would have to face dancing with Hijikata sooner or later. "I will, don't worry," she reassured the tailor before taking her leave.

Soon, it was the morning of the day before the ball, and both Hijikata and Chizuru were at the tailor's about an hour before he would open his shop. "Well, today's the last day we can get any practice in, so you young people go ahead and do your best," the tailor reminded them after teaching Hijikata how to properly approach her with a bow slightly more different than a traditional Japanese one, where he was to hold his right arm horizontally while he did so. He was also needed to tell her if she would "honor him by sharing the next dance with him". She, on the other hand, was to put her right foot behind her left, bend both knees and lift her skirts slightly. The tailor told them that what she was doing was a Western woman's way of bowing. "Well now, let's start, shall we?"

Both Hijikata and Chizuru looked at one another and repeated the gestures taught to them. Soon, they started the dance as the tailor started to hum the melody he always used whenever they practiced. Surprisingly, they were not the bumbling fools they thought themselves to be, particularly during the first few times when they truly started to practice with one anotherâ€| They were not stepping on each other's feet at all, nor did they go to the wrong direction

whenever they needed to turnâ€¦

"We are finally doing quite well, don't you think?" Hijikata asked, as he led Chizuru across the courtyard, spinning her as he was taught to. Frankly, he did not know what to say to her at all, feeling only the relief that he would be wasting her past efforts by messing anything up. Oh, he had seen how she would practice alone in the night in the courtyard of their headquarters when she thought that no one was watchingâ€¦ It could not be helped after all, for their rooms were so close to one another's.

Chizuru blushed. "Haiâ€¦" she murmured, and cast her eyes slightly downwards. She could feel the heat of his hand, one holding that of hers, the other, her waist. It feltâ€¦ strange, dancing with Hijikata. She had already trained her mind to be used to the notion of dancing so closely to a man, that for Westerners, it had meant nothing in particular, however, whenever he came into the picture, everything wasâ€¦ different. Her heartbeat was quicker, and she knew that it was not due to the slight physical exertion at allâ€¦ Well, at least they were now able to dance correctly.

At the end of the hour, the tailor was highly impressed. "The two of you are made to dance with one another! I told you practice makes perfect." he praised, and then went on to congratulate himself on his own genius for .?docid=23626035ching two people to dance in just two months with sporadic practice times. He told them that they could well dance on their own if they so wished, and Hijikata thanked him once again.

As they were walking back towards their headquarters, Hijikata and Chizuru passed by a flower-seller who was selling roses- a kind of flower that was not native to Japan. He bought several of them, all red like the color of blood, and once the seller had cut off the thorns, he pressed them into her hands. Red, he remembered, had been the color of the kimono that she had worn before, and he recalled that the color suited her very, very well indeed.

"Wear them in your hair the night of the ball," he told her, his violet eyes looking straight into her brown ones. There was a faint smile upon his handsome face, and her expression brightened in accordance to his. It would be a night to remember indeedâ€¦

* * *

><p>HAN: I do hope that you liked this chapter. I had the most fun time researching Victorian era evening gowns, and the worse thing is that I can't use the original<p>

8. If They Both Love Her

If They Both Loved Her...

Pairing: Harada X Chizuru X Hijikata

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><p>Somehow, Harada knew that something was going on when Hijikata told him that he wanted to talk to him privately. It was in Edo when Sannan first approached Chizuru for her blood. It had been a civil

request, but Hijikata was lucky enough to chance upon it. He had forbidden Sannan to continue in any development of the Rasetsu, and this has caused an insurmountable amount of tension between the two Vice-Commanders of the Shinsen-Gumi since. In fact, Harada himself had approached Sannan regarding this matter as well.

"As of yet, Sannan-san is still... unstable in his nature," Hijikata said to Harada immediately after the formalities were done with. They were all Rasetsu, Sannan and Heisuke, but for some reason, Heisuke still remained normal. Yes, he could not move under sunlight, but Heisuke was still Heisuke. Not like Sannan. No longer was the former co-Vice Commander of the Shinsen-Gumi the kindly man he once was, but a being of bloodlust that would harm anything to get what he wanted. "If his want for her blood increases I may not be able to hold him back."

Harada knew who Hijikata was referring to. It was an easy guess, but he also knew why Hijikata said those words. The fact that Rasetsu needed blood never escaped him, and he had seen Heisuke during the night as well. Heisuke was still the happy-go-lucky kid that he always was, unlike Sannan. "You want me to protect Chizuru from Sannan-san," he said to Hijikata, who nodded accordingly. He knew that Sannan wanted blood, Chizuru's blood, to be exact, the blood of the Oni, which was more potent than the blood that any human possessed, and was able to cause the Rasetsu to regain part of their sanity. Sannan needed her blood to perfect the Rasetsu that they of the Shinsen-Gumi had, moreover, with the increasing power of the New Meiji Government, and the fact that her father had already defected to the other side.

It had been a few years since Chizuru had come into the Shinsen-Gumi, and both men knew that she had wormed her way into each of their hearts in her own quiet manner. There, amongst their ranks, she was treasured because she became the very embodiment of what they had fought to protect all that was pure and good in the world. She was loved as a daughter or sister that none of them ever had, but to some of them, she would be something more, if Fate was kinder to them.

Hijikata knew that although Harada professed no great ambition, he had a great sense of responsibility, a code of honor that transcended that dictated by Bushido. Harada Sanosuke fought for those he loved, not for those he must. "I have asked you thus because I know that you care for her, more than any one of us," Hijikata replied. "Chizuru will listen to you if anything happens."

"She'll listen to you as well, Hijikata-san," Harada said, looking into the violet eyes of his superior. He was no fool; he knew from the start that Hijikata had taken a great liking towards Chizuru ever since she came into their organization a few winters ago. Hijikata had come to rely upon the smile that she would give all of them whenever they drank the tea she made just as he did. The man had protected her valiantly as well, particularly against the Oni Kazama Chikage. Who could ever forget that night when the leader of the Western Oni stormed into their headquarters? Hijikata had put his arms around her when she valiantly stood her ground against Kazama, with her kodachi unsheathed when he was rendered without a weapon, while he had gained his strength from her presence alone. It could not be mistaken, that from that moment on, the two of them were rivals for the heart of the same damsel.

Hijikata sighed. He knew where Harada was leading this conversation. He had already anticipated it. "She will have no future with me, Harada," he said. He knew where his path lied. He would fight to the death for the Shinsen-Gumi, for their cause, and he knew that it was a path that he could not allow Chizuru to walk. He could not tell her that he loved her, and then break her heart if and when he died in battle. "But with youâ€|"

"You love her enough to let me love her?" Harada asked him. It was a total irony, but it was one that was understood between them. They both loved the same woman, and Hijikata gave him the blessing to pursue her, as well as the orders to protect her from any eventuality.

"Chizuru does not deserve to be thrown like a doll between us," Hijikata said. "I have already decided my fate, and despite what I feel for her, I know that my time in this world ends with the Shinsen-Gumi. I will make a last stand so that we are worthy of remembrance, and because of this, I cannot keep her by my side."

Harada sighed. "I have no choice, then," he replied. "I'll guess I'll have to thank you, then." With those words, he rose from his seated position and moved to leave Hijikata's room. "I'll do everything I can do protect her, you have my promise."

"I will kill you if you dare bring a tear to her at all," Hijikata threatened in return, spoken in his usual manner, of stern tonality, but with a smile gracing his handsome face. "May you find your happiness with herâ€| that is an order."

"Arigatou," Harada thanked Hijikata with a bow, a bow that was returned to him as well. There could be no other way to do this, no other way to make their situation easier to solve, for even though if they both loved her, one of them had to back down, for her happiness. It would be the same even if Harada had done so as well, but Hijikata would not have it this way. Hence, he let go. He let go, so that the two of them could find one another, and there was no man more deserving of Chizuru than Harada.

* * *

><p>He would never forget that day, when it was almost dusk when Hijikata summoned him. He would never forget that moment when two brothers in arms proclaimed their love for the same woman, and one of them selflessly let go of his love for her so that their once-great organization could go down in infamy.<p>

It was one more way where Harada knew he owed Hijikata, and he would repay him by surviving these turbulent times, by making sure that he and Chizuru would have a future filled with love and laughter. He did not want to commit seppuku before Hijikata's ghost if he had failed to do so.

* * *

><p>HAN: I have always suspected that Hijikata and Harada knew that they were rivals, heh heh heh. ^.^ I just put my suspicions into this little scenario...<p>

9. The Nightmare

The Nightmare

Pairing: Hijikata X Chizuru

* * *

><p>It was a story that Chizuru had told him that evening, when all their work had been done for the day. It was in the middle of autumn and Souji had the great idea to cook sweet potatoes with the leaves that she had swept up. Thus, they all stood around the fire and told each other stories about everything under the sun.<p>

"My father once told me that a long time ago, a fisherman caught a beautiful hagoromo (feathered robe) in his fishing net. Thinking it belonged to a nearby princess, he dared not toss it back into the seaâ€¦ The next instant, he saw before him the most beautiful woman bathing in the shallows. Thinking that the hagoromo was hers, he quickly returned it to her, and the woman thanked him, and revealed to him that she was no mortal being, but a tennyo from the heavens. According to the laws of her people, she must give herself to the man who found her lost hagoromo and thus she married him. The fisherman fell in love with his beautiful new bride, and hid the hagoromo away, so that she would not be able to fly back to the heavensâ€¦"

Chizuru's voice paused for a while, and Hijikata caught a sigh from her. "What's wrong?" he asked her, knowing her well enough to sense that she was having some difficulty finishing the tale.

Thankfully, she shook her head, signaling that she was alright. "It's just the ending of the story," she replied, and Heisuke urged her to continue her tale. "In the end, the tennyo discovered the location of her hagoromo from her young child and retrieved it, going back to her home and leaving her family."

Saito, ever the analytical one, offered a viable explanation. "Perhaps the tennyo cannot survive in mortal lands for too long?" he offered, and his words changed Chizuru's furrowed brow into a small, emergent smile. "She may have loved her family dearly too, but she had no choice."

In the end, all of them took Saito's explanation for the reason why the tennyo left, but deep in Hijikata's heart, he knew that what Chizuru had told them was not all that encompassed the tale of the tennyo. It had stirred something deep within him, memories that he never thought that he held, dreams that he had never seen in his entire lifeâ€¦

* * *

><p>Bloodâ€¦ he had seen only bloodâ€¦

_What sort of dream was this? He remembered every single face of the men that he had killed, but he recognized not the faces that he was seeing. More importantly, the timeâ€¦ seemed to be incorrect. He barely remembered seeing anyone dressed as they were, bearing the

weapons that they did. Was he seeing such images in the first place?_

"_Mikagi!" cried a woman with hair of sapphire hue and eyes of amber. He could feel the great power from her, power that he knew he could never understand. She was beautiful, so beautiful that it was humanly impossible. Could she be the tennyo that Chizuru had spoke of earlier? There was desperation in her voice, and for some reason, he had hardened his heart against her cries. "I beg you, please, return mana to me! I cannot live without it!"_

Mana? He had never heard of it before, but he knew that the woman could not have it. She would leave him if she had it, and that was one thing that he could never afford. "Do not speak of that infernal object!" he hissed as a servant-girl poured sake into his cup. "Tonight we are celebrating the first month of my youngest child's birth, do not darken the mood."

The woman, his wife, however, was unrelenting. "Please, Mikagi," she pleaded, tears starting to form in her eyes. What beast was he that he did not acquiescence her wish immediately? If her life depended on it, why hadn't he even tried to return to her the thing that she needs most?

"_Silence!" The cup that he was drinking from was broken when he flung it onto the wooden floors of their magnificent home, rising with anger. He was getting tired of her incessant pleas, and knew that he had to stop her from even wanting to return from whence she came. He would not have her leave him. "That thing will take you away from me," he told her, his voice lowering into something slightly gentler, but still, poisonous. _

_He took her by the shoulders, helping her to stand, but at that moment, he tore off her clothes and ravished her then and there. There was no love, no tenderness at all in the act. It served only to remind her that she was his and his alone. _

_Days later, it was raining, and he noticed that his family was not in their home. His fears were all realized, his woman finally left him. They would not go far, not in her weakened state, with three children in tow. He did not even need to break a sweat to stop them from even moving three miles from the borders of their tribal lands.

_

"_Quick, Oka-sama," he heard their young daughter calling out to his woman. She was a beautiful child, responsible and dutiful. He was proud to have her as a daughter, but, she was a dangerous entity to him. The child was her mother's strongest supporter, and would often help his woman to locate her most precious object, which he had kept hidden from the world. "We must go before Otou-sama comes back!"_

_It was then when he emerged from the shadows. "Where do you intend to go?" he asked them, and his woman was prudently silent. The child on the other hand. _

"_Otou-sama, please, give mana back to Oka-sama!" she begged with all her heart. "She is growing weaker, if you don't. _

_The girl never had a chance to continue. With his own strength, he

had knocked the child with the back of his hand onto the tree beside them. The impact killed her instantly. "I will not forgive anyone who tries to take you away from me," he told his woman who immediately rushed to their dead child's side. "Not even my own daughter." _

Tears ran down his woman's eyes as she faced him, her expression was one that he had never even seen before. Pain, anger, hatred, disappointmentâ€¦ It all culminated into the stream of tears that flowed from her amber eyes, and it made his heart race, not out of desire, but out of fear.

_It was the last time that he would ever see his woman, for he felt tremendous pain all around his body. He was cut by unknown weapons in dozens of places all over his body. It was no wonder that he breathed his last looking at her amber eyesâ€¦ _

What had he done?

* * *

><p>"Hijikata-sanâ€¦ Hijikata-san!"<p>

Chizuru, it was Chizuru's voice calling towards him. He opened his eyes and realized that he was there in his own room, with Chizuru hovering over him. "Whyâ€¦ are you here in my room?" he asked her. She was supposed to be sleeping at this time, and not there.

"I heard you screaming in your sleepâ€¦" she replied, concern so thick in her words. She was housed in the room next to his, so it was no wonder that she could hear him anyways. "Hijikata-san, is anything wrong?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No, Chizuru, I am fine," he told her. "It was just a nightmare, nothing more. All of us have them, from time to time." That may be, but the one that he had just seen was no ordinary nightmare. It was so real to him, soâ€¦ surreal that it seemed to him that he had lived through those days beforeâ€¦ Could it be a glimpse into a past life of his, many thousands of years ago?

"Are you sure that you're alright?" Chizuru asked further, and he pulled her down towards him, shocking her to no end.

"Yes, I will," he told her, lifting her chin so that he could look into her sable colored eyes. The woman in his nightmare might have been beautiful, but she could never compare to Chizuru. Her features were much softer, more angelic and pure, as compared to the woman's seductive attractiveness and melancholic hatred. "Now, go back to sleep. I will not be held responsible when you fall asleep while cooking breakfast tomorrow."

The girl smiled and bowed before returning to her own room, leaving him alone to his devices. She did not know how much peace she had brought to him, or even the fact that he never had another nightmare like that one ever again because he knew that she would always be there when he needed her most.

* * *

><p>HAN: If this chapter comes across as illogical and nonsensical, I apologize. This one was done purely out of the fangirl in me, having very much to do with the fact that Miki Shin-ichiro, the Seiyuu that voiced Hijikata also starred in Ayashi No Ceres as the main villain, heh heh heh. So I decided to put in a wee little crossover. I hope that you don't mind!<p>

10. The Rabbit Made of Snow

The Snow-made Rabbit

Pairing: Saito X Chizuru

* * *

><p>"Saito-san, haven't you made snow-bunnies before?"<p>

It was a casual question, a rather nonsensical one to the analytical warrior like he was. Who would ever make rabbit shapes out of snow in the first place? What would be the purpose of it, and what could be gained from such an experience?

He looked into her eyes with bewilderment and sensed the piqued interest in that of Harada, Heisuke and Shinpachi's. If Souji was there, he would never, ever hear the end of it. "Most of us used to make them when we were kids," Harada commented, and he was the most diplomatic of the infamous pranksters of the Shinsen-Gumi.

She, on the other hand, wasted no time indeed. Bending down to ground level, she started to compact the snow with her hands into an oval shape. With that completed, she moved towards the nearest bamboo tree to pick the shortest leaves it had, and stuck two to each side of the frontal apex of the oval made of snow

He watched on as she labored to show him what they had meant by a "snow-bunny", and his sapphire eyes were only focused upon her, and not entirely what she was doing. The soft flutter of her eyelids as she continued to shape the packed snow in her dainty hands, the upturned corner of her pinkish lips as she gradually become satisfied with her work, and there was one more detail that he was sure no man would ever miss: That soft glow upon her fair face that was caused by her body's reaction towards the cold around her. He had never seen her so beautiful before, as if she had belonged to a work of art by history's great masters amongst the snow and the backdrop that was the infamous Nishi Hongan-ji (and he had even seen her in her Geisha disguise as well).

"Here you are, Saito-san," she said finally, placing the immensely cold object into his hand. Their fingers touched ever so briefly, but she did not notice that, partly because she was so keen on discovering his reaction upon receiving the "bunny". She had never seen a more peculiar being before. All this fascination for a small little thing like this? It made her wonder what sort of childhood he had, and she knew that with his character, he would not be divulging it anytime soon.

"Thank you," he managed to stutter. Reverently, he laid that thing down onto the snow in tandem with her movements, realizing a tiny

little detail when they rose again. "Your hands are cold," he said, holding onto her hands with his own, not even noticing how much redder her face had been once she was aware of the contact between them. "Please, it is time for you to get inside; you are bound to catch a cold if you remain out here without thicker clothes."

He was successful in getting her indoors, the other three, on the other hand, were a touch harder to handle.

"Hajime-kun, is there something that you're not telling us?" Heisuke teased with a wide grin. It was obvious that all of them had seen whatever had happened just moments ago.

Even Shinpachi started to add to Heisuke's teasing. "You'd better act quickly if you want to get the girl, Saito," he added. "Hijikata-san or Souji might be well ahead of you already"

He remained silent. There was no use in rebutting them at all. Their antics would only become more pronounced if he had done so. However, he was not without a solution. All it took was for him to ever so slightly unsheathe his katana by lifting the tsuba up with his thumb and a cold stare, and he had ensured their eternal silence on the matter. With that, he returned indoors as well, with no specific to meet them at all until dinnertime.

On his way back to his quarters, he passed by Chizuru's, and saw that she was taking a nap, wrapped blissfully in her blankets. Such a strange soul she was, and he knew not one person who could ever captivate him with such blissful simplicity and for that, he would always treasure her for giving him that memory of annoyingly teasing and busy-bodied comrades in arms, and the sight of her beauty

He would protect that memory that had been just created to the ending of his life.

* * *

><p>HAN: This was based off one of the CGs that was on Hakuouki Zuisouroku when you play Saito's route. It is the most adorable scene ever. ^.^<p>

11. Down This Road Together

Down This Road... Together

Pairing: Souji X Chizuru

* * *

><p>She was a paradox an utter mystery.<p>

How was it possible that one so small could have so much strength, and how one as young as she could have wisdom beyond her years? How could a young woman like her, unable to wield a weapon show more courage in the face of death than they who were perfectly able to protect her?

She had been something to royalty amongst her own race, and because of him, had been reduced to nothing more than a Rasetsu able to

withstand sunlight due to her stronger Oni bloodâ€¦ It was because of him that she had to endure that fate, thanks to his inability to properly defend her against her brother, which had brought them one misfortune upon the otherâ€¦ How could she ever come to love a man as he was?

"We'll stop here for a while," he announced, and sat down, leaning upon the trunk of an ancient pine tree. It was the hottest part of the day, and even with his physical ability to overcome the general weakness of all Rasetsu and her blood, he knew that it would be difficult for them to continue their journey. They were Rasetsu, they were not Gods, after all.

She nodded, and started to sit beside him, arms and legs folded as demurely as ever. He took one look at her and asked himself, what fool of a man would ever mistake such grace and beauty for a young boy? However, he was grateful that most of the subordinates of the Shinsen-Gumi were fools because she had been through years masquerading as a young, slightly feminine boy. "Okita-san, do you need water?" she asked him, bringing out the flask of water that they had shared between them in the little bag she carried along their journey.

There was no use refusing her. If he did, she would press him on to drink it anyways, thus, he accepted the flask of water, his hands touching hers ever so softly, and after he had drunk his share, he pulled her into his arms. "Why are you here?" he asked her, combing his fingers through the ponytail that she had set her hair in. "You could've chosen to go with Hijikata-sanâ€¦"

"I am here because I want to," she replied, leaning her head deeper into his embrace. "Okita-san, it's the only thing that I can do to help you, to repay your kindnessâ€¦"

"I have been everything but kind to you, I'm afraid," Okita answered. He remembered the first time he had met her personally, he had threatened to kill her. In her early days with the Shinsen-Gumi, he would constantly tease her one way or the other, either by threatening death or by placing her and Hijikata in a romantic lightâ€¦ He was like a young boy who pulled at a girl's hair because he liked her, and wanted to get her attention.

She looked up to him and stared at him with those big, brown eyes. "I don't care," she replied. "I love you, and that's why I'm here."

Those words were words that made his heart soar, as if they were the words that could fill his dark, empty soul. She had always been one for words, able to inspire great thoughts of wisdom in others, but those words that he had heard, they were short and blunt, but they held so much meaning to him that he knew that he could burst. He had told her that he loved her before, and she had accepted them, but nowâ€¦

He caught her hands in his, and kissed them. He took his katana and placed it right between them, guiding her small hands to grasp its handle in his own. "Then so be it," he said. "From this day on, I will fight for only you... Not Kondou-san, or the Shinsen-Gumi, but for you, and only you."

She smiled, and threw her arms around him. "Then I will always be by your side," she told him. "We will walk this road together."

It was a promise sealed with a kiss, a pact eternal.

12. The First Step

"I would rather spend one lifetime with you, than to face all of the Ages of the world alone! I choose a mortal life"

They were watching a movie about a team of warriors setting out into the wilderness to destroy a great evil, and the protagonist's lady love had just pledged herself to him, casting away her immortal life for him! Those words that she had uttered brought a tear into her eye. Many, many decades ago, she would have had the opportunity to say the same words to the one she held so highly in her own heart.

But that was the past.

She was in the present, and it was much different than what she had thought that it would be.

"I know what you are thinking," a deep, baritone voice pierced through her mind. She looked up at the owner of the voice, and found not a man with black hair and deep amethyst eyes, but a golden-haired one with eyes the color of blood. "Your thoughts have drifted towards the ones in the Shinsen-Gumi!"

She could not deny whatever he had said. "Hai!" she acknowledged, and bowed her head. To her surprise, he lifted her chin towards him, forcing her to meet his eyes once again, but his expression was not hard. It never was.

"You do not need to feel any guilt, my love," he told her, his tone now bordering between condescension and tenderness. "Those men were your guardians for a long time; they were your friends as well." Of course, there would be several among them that had been silent suitors after her favor, but due to the fact that they were fighting a losing war, they dared not claim her heart for fear of hurting her when they have gone. They also knew that they were mortal, while she was immortal, a sakura blossom whose petals would never wilt, that will never die. That was why they had relinquished her to his care, because he was the only one who had the power to ensure her happiness. That was why that had moved ever north when the Ishin-Shishi had won the Bakumatsu, until their final downfall with the newborn Ezo Republic!

"Chikage-san!" she murmured his name, and he stroked her long chestnut hair as she sank herself into his arms. She would never forget them! She could never forget them, and she had cherished them as they had loved her in their own way. However, she was getting tired of it. It had been more than a century since they had left her, and she knew that it was time that she had moved on. "I need your help!"

He harrumphed. "You have consented to one day be my wife, Chizuru, all that I can and will achieve is yours, you just need to ask," he told her. It was not the first time that he had said those words to

her. It would not be the last time either.

"It's time," she told him, her iron will resurfacing through her voice. "I wantâ€¦ to let them go now."

"Hmph, I've waited for you to say those words for 150 years now. I will do what I can," he replied, and pressed his lips onto hers. It was a promise that was his to keep, and he had planned to see it done, but he needed her word before it was done at all. He would let her initiate those kinds of things, because he knew that she needed time to get comfortable with any endeavor she was going to undertake herself. They had time, however, in all technicality, time was their servant.

"Thank you," she murmured again, and forced a smile through the slight stream of tears that she had summoned from her eyes. Somehow, the constricting feeling in her chest, it all disappeared, and when she had straightened herself up, she was able to keep her head out high, and not let it slump when she knew that he was not looking. For that, she was thankful, and she knew, that it would not be hard to learn to love him, as he had given so much time and energy to love her.

It was the first step and she had taken, and it was enough for him.

13. A Night of Two Interruptions

Pairing: Hijikata X Chizuru

* * *

><p>"Why do you hold onto something that you cannot hold forever?" Kazama Chikage's voice penetrated Hijikata's mind as he was poring over his usual workload.<p>

The first thing Hijikata reached for was his katana, but the Ki that emanated from Kazama was not violent that night, and that observation stayed his hand. "What do you want?" he asked in reply, amethyst eyes glaring daggers at the Oni who had the bravery to somehow appear in his quarters in the dead of the night.

"You stubbornly hold onto your cause, knowing full well that it was lost even before it began," Kazama chided. "Moreover, on a more personal level, you fools seek to defend me from my future wife â€" yet another inevitability that you fail to see even though it has been presented to clearly to you."

Hijikata refused to back down. "We fight because we choose to," he replied bluntly. "In these days of blood and the sword, we put ourselves to bastards like you to show that we are here, we are alive, and we will defend all that we hold dear." He had not broached the subject on Chizuru though. He only knew that Kazama wanted her because she was from a pure and high Oni lineage. He would not stand for that. If Chizuru was to have a partner in the world, he would ensure that the man would love her, cherish her, and protect her. He would only release her from their care, from the Shinsen-Gumi's protection, only when she had found and chosen such a man.

"You are a fool," Kazama taunted. His red eyes looked towards the moon and sighed. "People die every day and wars start every moment. How many can you defend? Your life will end before Japan is at peace. You fight your way to the light, but you can never reach it."

"Hmph, for someone who won't die, you can be pessimistic," Hijikata retorted.

"I only fear her heart breaking when all of you expire," Kazama returned in a similar, haughty tone. "Oni and humans were never destined to be together, because they will be parted by the ages. You think that you can love her forever, but you will wither and die, while she has to bear the memory of you for the rest of her life, whether or not she is able to move on. Would you curse her so, Hijikata Toshizo?"

Hijikata was adamant. "It is up to her to choose who she loves," he growled. "None of us have the right to alter that choice."

"You do admit it then, mortal, that you have feelings for her?"

"I reserve the right not to answer that question," Hijikata defended. It was not because he deemed it private, but because he himself did not have the answer. Did he love Chizuru? Or did he happen to care for her, because it was his duty? She was, after all, a ward of the Shinsen-Gumi, their cherished friendâ€|

Kazama harrumphed. "You have now twice-proven yourself as a fool, human," he said, standing up and leaving through the door. He did not elaborate again why he found Hijikata a fool, but he did leave with a cynical smile on his lips before disappearing into the night, leaving him to ponder on various thoughts that he had once brushed aside because of what he deemed as his duties.

Hijikata was once again interrupted by yet another voice. This time, it was Kondou. "Toshi, I seemed to have heard someone in your roomâ€| who were you talking to?"

"There was no one here, Kondou-san," Hijikata denied. There was no need to alarm his friend and leader at this time of night.

"Ah," Kondou replied and made to return to his quarters.

"Waitâ€| Kondou-san, there is something that I must ask you."

"What is it, Toshi?"

Falling silent, Hijikata realized that there was no need to alarm Kondou over such trivial matters. "It'sâ€| nothing, forgive me for disturbing you."

"Toshi, you really should lighten up," Kondou said. "Even the Oni-fukuchou needs to have an outletâ€| Why not talk to Yukimura-kun? She's always an open ear."

A smile crept onto Hijikata's lips at that point. "Perhaps," he replied, his thoughts clearly focused on the young girl whose room was opposite his across the courtyard.

"You know, a girl like her would have many suitors," Kondou added.

"If you don't act fast enough, Souji or some other boy would snap her up before your eyes."

"Whatâ€¦| Kondou-san, what do you mean by that?" Hijikata asked, utterly flustered by those words, due to the implication of Kondou's words.

It was Kondou's turn to grin. "Oh, nothing, just an old man rambling on insignificant thingsâ€¦| Good night, Toshi."

"Good night, Kondou-san."

* * *

><p>HAN: Hello, I'm back! After such a long hiatus, I felt like it was time to revisit the Hakuouki universe and immerse myself in it. Thank you for all your lovely reviews throughout this time and I'll see you again soon!<p>

14. The Western Gown: Part 3

The Western Gown: Part 3

Pairing: Hijikata X Chizuru

* * *

><p>Evening.<p>

The Shinsen-Gumi headquarters were in an utter uproar. They had never seen Western clothes before, much less Hijikata and Chizuru donning them. Hijikata was wearing what seemed to be tight-fitting gi and hakama, where the gi was split into two at the back, longer than the front â€" as if he was wearing the tails of swallows, while Chizuru, she was dressed in clothes that made the bottom half of her body look like an oversized bell. They were a color that resembled a mixture of pink and purple with hints of lavender. On her arms she wore white gloves that reached almost to her shoulders, a small string of pearls at her wrist. Her shoesâ€¦| they were the most peculiar things ever. They were black with tiny glass ornaments that looked like jewels, and with slightly elevated heels at the back. All in all, they were a curious sight indeed.

"Whoever knew that the lad looks so cute in a Western gown?" one of the men teased, obviously oblivious to Chizuru's true nature.

"Heh, heh, they actually look like a good match if we didn't know better!"

They did not know the utter irony behind their words. Chizuru could only blush at their praises, while Hijikata could only glare at them with his sharp, amethyst eyes.

"Oi, oi, is it alright for Hijikata-san to hold Chizuru-chan so closely?" Harada added to their teasing, which made Chizuru's face redder than the red lacquered structures in Kyoto, and Hijikata's expression ever more poisonous.

The tailor cleared his throat. "It is a Western custom," he

explained. "It is how a gentleman should treat a lady, after all."

"Well, let's not delay them any further," Kondou suggested. "They are on a mission, after all."

A special horse-drawn carriage was sent to the Shinsen-Gumi headquarters to pick them up. The man steering it was a Westerner, who tipped his hat to both Hijikata and Chizuru and opened the door for them to enter. Hijikata made to go into the carriage first, but his entry was barred by the Westerner.

"Hijikata-san, usually the woman enters before the man," the tailor explained. "It is to show courtesy to the woman."

Slightly embarrassed about his mistake, Hijikata took a side-step and allowed Chizuru to enter first. The West truly had some strange customs. It was not the Japanese way where men deferred to women. He, of course knew that there were little differences between the capabilities of men and women (because he was raised by his highly proficient sisters), but then again, their country was one of tradition, and although some traditions were outdated, they must still be respected perhaps.

Once in the carriage, Hijikata sighed. "Hijikata-san, you look troubled," Chizuru said with concern, her brow furrowed as she tried to pinpoint the nature of his expression. "Is there something wrong?"

"No," Hijikata said, and looked up to gaze at her. At that moment, he realized that Chizuru had looked more beautiful than she ever had, even more when she had the roses he bought for her in her hair, even more beautiful than when she had once masqueraded as a geiko. He felt his face heat up and looked away. "I was just thinking that the men are idiots."

Chizuru chuckled. She had always known him to be disapproving of their teasing ways. They were all grown men, but still, they liked to joke and tease around. She liked to think of them as the "boys" of the Shinsen-Gumi instead, because Harada, Nagakura and Heisuke would always fight between themselves for food, and Souji would always pointlessly challenge Hijikata and/or Saito into duels of swords or even words.

"Nothing could ever let your spirit down, can it?" Hijikata asked her, causing her eyes to widen. "Chizuru, you are like the sun"

"The sun?" Chizuru asked.

"In these dark times, when we are haunted by even the red moon, all of us clamored towards a greater source of light," Hijikata added. "No matter what happens to you, you would be smiling as you are now. You have saved me, even, from the darkness that we try so hard to become."

Chizuru did not know what to say. Hijikata had never been like this around her before, not in her years with the Shinsen-Gumi. "Hijikata-san" she murmured his name.

"Perhaps what I mean to say, isâ€¦" The carriage came to an abrupt stop. The Western man steering the carriage screamed, and soon enough, Hijikata could hear the familiar splatter of blood. "We are being attacked!" Grabbing Chizuru by the wrist, he led her out of the carriage, only to see that along the way to their destination, all the other carriages had been ambushed. "Chizuru, it's going to be dangerous, but we must move forwards to know who the perpetrators are," he warned her, and she nodded. "I want you to run as fast as you can, and stay close to me."

Watching as Hijikata picked up a fallen saber, a Western weapon which was more or less the slightly inferior cousin of the Japanese katana, she said, "I understand."

"Now come, we shall get to the bottom of this."

* * *

><p>Kazama Chikage harrumphed. Humans were beings that neither had honor nor brains. They thought that they could master what they could not control, but in the end, it was they who ended up being consumed. The Choushu-han, knowing that the Westerners would have invited Bakufu agents to this festival of theirs, had brought along their host of Rasetsu to protect themselves. Just because a footman had hurt himself while assembling the cannons that were being displayed, the Rasetsu had gone berserk, killing everything in their path.<p>

"The corpses seem to stop here, something must have happened inside."

That was Hijikata's voice. Why has that meddling fool come?

"Such destructionâ€¦" a female voice. A familiar one at that. "Hijikata-san, could it beâ€¦"

"Yes, it was the Rasetsu's doing," Kazama answered her question, stepping out from the shadows and into the moonlight. "The Choushu-han were large enough fools to bring them into the field, and thus, disaster struck."

Hijikata's hand immediately flew to the hilt of his katana. "I don't believe you, how can the Choushu-han have access to them?"

Kazama harrumphed again. "Clearly you were not paying attention when I warned my future wife that her father was now working for your enemies," he said in that usual, pompous, baritone of his. He realized the sigh of resistance when he called Chizuru his future wife and smiled a sly smile. "Don't worry, I've gotten rid of them, as I will get rid of yours soon enough."

"If you dare to attack our headquarters again, I will seek you out and burn you," Hijikata threatened. He remembered well enough the attack Kazama and his lackeys launched on the Shinsen-Gumi headquarters. They were aiming for Chizuru that night, and were almost successful in retrieving her.

"Pitiless human, you do not know what you are up against," Kazama taunted. "However, I shall have to thank you for presenting my future wife to me in such a comely likeness. First you dress her up as a

geiko, and now, a daughter of the Western landsâ€¦| what won't you do next to entertain me?"

"She is not your future wife!" Hijikata rebuked at the top of his lungs. His free hand flew to Chizuru's and held it up, as if trying to prove a point to Kazama. "She will marry whom she chooses!"

Snickering, Kazama taunted Hijikata further. "Will you make her a young widow then, when you expire from your disastrous path, Hijikata Toshizo, Fukuchou of the Shinsen-Gumi?"

At that time, even Chizuru could not take it anymore. "Kazama-san, please stop it," she pleaded, glaring him down with honey-brown eyes with a fury that Hijikata could not hope to match.

"As my future wife commands," Kazama said, moving towards her to lift her chin with his finger and thumb. "Soon, Yukimura Chizuru, you will be my wife. Mark my words." Having said thus, he moved past Hijikata, completely disregarding him and disappeared into the shadows. But even as his presence could no longer be felt, his voice could still be heard in the streets. "My quarrel with you shall begin another day."

Minutes passed, and nothing changed saved the clouds surrounding the moon. Hijikata heaved a sigh of relief and told Chizuru, "Come, let's go home."

Chizuru nodded. "Hai," she said, and walked back to the Shinsen-Gumi headquarters with Hijikata. Their hands were still joined, and remained so until they arrived at the front gate of the Nishi Hongan-jii, where they had called home.

15. A Lucky Girl

Pairing: Chizuru X Hijikata/Harada/Saito/Heisuke/Okita - observed by Kimigiku

* * *

><p>Men were utter fools when it came to matters of love and war. As for them, the leaders of the Shinsen-Gumi, as well as one of their enemies, they were men who were both in love and war. It made mattersâ€¦| more complicated.

She started observing the strapping lad with hair that shone as if they were dark amethysts, draped in a simple black yukata, a sole white scarf adorning his form. The fools had brought her to Shimabara once again, to celebrate whatever small victory their rag-tag group of self-proclaimed Shogunate servants enjoyed.

That left-handed youngling was drinking silently as his companions chatted, stealing glances at the girl that they brought along with them â€" a jewel of the Oni species dressed in coarse blush-colored gi and beige hakama, as if she was a boy, she herself too unexperienced in the world of men and alcohol to say anything but to agree with those around her.

"You are embarrassing Yukimura-kun," the lad admonished when some

among them made a very, very off-color innuendo involving one of the men's former pursuits of the female gender.

"Ehâ€¦ I'm sorry, Chizuru-chan," said the man dressed in green and purple, laughing sheepishly. She was so much a part of them that he had forgotten that she was a demure girl with demure sensibilities. It was, of course, one of the traits that she felt the heiress of the Yukimura clan to shed if she was to be the scion and de facto Head of her clan in the future. But then againâ€¦ the girl had not fully embraced her heritage yet.

A harrumph entered into the conversation. It was the tall, elegant man with clear, violet-hued eyes. The Oni-Fukuchou of the Shinsen-Gumi. "Honestly, Shinpachi, show a little maturity," he chided, taking a small sip of sake as he said those words. He was a beautiful specimen, even for a man. Long, flowing ebony hair, sharp eyes and a commanding presence, many women swooned over him while men stepped away from him in fear. But for all his calm, all his military stratagems par excellence, he had also one weakness.

"Hijikata-san, it's alright," the Oni girl replied with a light smile, her brow a little furrowed with the awkwardness of the situation. "I think I've already gotten used to it."

It took a fool to believe her, and the man called Hijikata was not one at all. Although he was silent, she sensed that he was somehowâ€¦ relieved that she was enjoying their company. Truly, she was not a woman of great beauty, but his attentions had been entirely focused on her, despite the fact that he had one of Shimabara's foremost geiko pouring sake for him. It was almost infectious, he smiled when she did, chuckled when she belted out loud bouts of laughter with their companionsâ€¦

And then, there was also the other boy with long hair, and teal eyes. He adored the girl like a puppy adored the first person that fed it, drowning himself in the little attentions. His widened gaze, the stutter that he fell into when one of them suggested that she dressed the girl like a true geiko in their drunken merriment was one that many would have part with much gold to see. His face turned red, repeating over and over again how "cute" she looked in silken kimono.

"Chizuru-chan most definitely can make Kimigiku-san run for her money," said the man who paid for the night. It seemed that from his expression, he would have expected the girl to look like that even as she had been dressing like a boy. Such an appraisal was one of confidence, and it made the girl blush even more.

"It is such a waste that Chizuru-chan has to don her usual clothes around us," another man teased. Broad-shouldered with hair the color of sand, he was only slightly more of a boy than a man, one who possessed great skill despite being on the verge of being plagued with the onset of a frightening disease.

The purple-haired lad said nothing, only looking at her over and over again, while the one who paid for that night's entertainment mused at her beauty. He too, had something for her, although it was difficult to place. Between the teasing attentions of the younger ones and the silent admiration of the likes of Hijikata and the strict lad, she realized that no woman was ever as lucky as the girl. She had been

orphaned by the greater designs of things, but she had those men and boys around herâ€|

It was obvious that she held a special place in each of their hearts. If even such a small, mundane thing like putting on a kimono and some rouge made them think she was as if a Goddess had descended from the Heavensâ€|

"She seems to be a very special child, no?" she teased their leader, pouring him more sake.

"She is the Light for all of us," Hijikata muttered, clearly his head was already muddled by his intake of sake. He was not only famous as the Oni-Fukuchou, but also a lightweight when it came to alcohol. "Herâ€| existence seemed to bring us back toâ€| happier timesâ€|"

"The light indeed," she repeated in her Kansai accent, customary for all women serving in Shimabara. "She is a lucky girl to have so many good men caring after her."

A small smile graced Hijikata's handsome features. He did not reply, and continued to watch the night's proceedings silently. He mumbled something else, but she could not hear it. Her employer would beâ€| amused to hear her report on the actions of the Shinsen-Gumi's leaders that night. Very amused indeed.

16. My wife

Pairing: Kazama X Chizuru

Scenario: A play on the reason why Kazama always addresses Chizuru as his "wife", perhaps Chizuru really was his future wife?

* * *

><p>The atmosphere of the hall was stifling. Two clans sat across one another, both equally as powerful, having plentiful lands, relative peace and blessed families.<p>

"Today we shall conclude the negotiations of the betrothal between the oldest son of the Kazama clan and the oldest daughter of the Yukimura clan," said one of the elders from the Amagiri clan, the retainers Kazama clan. The descendants of the famed Suzuka Gozen as well as the Shiranui clan from Choushu were also present as guests and witnesses.

The son and daughter in question had a rather large age gap between them where human years were concerned. The Kazama boy was already almost a man, tall and stern like the rest of his clan. He had piercing ruby eyes and hair that reflected the color of the sun, while the Yukimura girl was only little more than a toddler with eyes of honey and a flower in her hair, tucked into the fold of her left ear. They sat opposite one another, trying to remain as still as possible or they would receive harsh scolding from every adult in attendance.

There were many conditions for the marriage, but for the couple in question, it did not matter at all. The Yukimura clan was to offer

training to the healers of the Kazama train every three summers, while the Kazama was to exchange their best horticulturalists for the healers during the said time. The Yukimura clan was to furnish their daughter's wedding trousseau, while the Kazama clan was to pay a bride-price of sizable sumâ€|

Young Kazama Chikage tried hard not to yawn, and as he forced his head up, he realized that his future wife, the even younger Yukimura Chizuru was barely able to stay awake. Was such a young girl able to sit so still for so long? So, to keep her awake, he waved at her and produced a butterfly from the palm of his hand. It was only an image, not more corporal than the clouds in the sky, but it was enough to make her forget her tiredness and started to look at the butterfly in delight.

The adults around them noticed the little spectacle and although they made no mention of it to the children, they realized how powerful the Kazama boy actually was. The Oni were indeed gifted with nigh immortal lives and superhuman healing abilities, but if he was able to conjure such an illusion at such a young ageâ€| He would not only be the leader of the Kazama clan, but perhaps even of all the Oni in the futureâ€|

It once again reiterated how important this match was for the Oni race. They knew that the Yukimura girl, given the correct training and nurture, would be nothing less impressive than her future husband. Their children would have greater powers than the two of them and it could herald an age where the Oni would no longer need to depend on the greedy, violent humans.

Hours later, the negotiations were completed. Chikage and Chizuru were made to walk hand in hand towards the entrance of the hall, to be displayed to their respective clan. Their wedding ceremony would be held when Chizuru turned sixteen. After all, Oni children came to maturity at the same speed as human children. She would be a perfectly blossomed flower then.

"Chikage-san, would you like to play?" little Chizuru asked Chikage once the formalities were over. She did not know what the future bode for her, but she knew that she was to see the handsome, older boy more and more often, and such a possibility made her happyâ€| for some reason. "There's this pretty field at the back of my house andâ€|"

Chikage did not utter anything in return. He just took her hand and ran with her in the direction she had indicated, running towards the sunlight and the scent of spring flowers.

* * *

><p>Years later

* * *

><p>"So, there is your little betrothed," Shiranui said to Kazama from their vantage point in Nijio Castle. "She looks no different than she did at the day your betrothal was announced, except just a hair taller."<p>

"Yukimura Chizuru is now a lovely young woman," Amagiri added,

creating a different version of Shiranui's observation. "I hear she is well-loved by the Shinsen-Gumi."

Kazama harrumphed. "She will be mine soon enough," he said, "And I shall be free from the lecturing of those old goats at home about siring an heir for the Kazama clan."

"Are you sure that's why we're here?" Shiranui asked him. "Just so you can get a couple of sons out of her?"

"Oni women are precious, don't you want a suitable wife as well?"

Shiranui shook his head. "Unlike you, I'm not the heir and leader of my clan. I can do whatever I want and sadly, that does not entail abducting a young girl to be my wife."

"Suit yourself then," Kazama jibed in return. He let out a flare of Ki, and successfully alerted her of their presence. "So it begins!"

Yukimura Chizuru looked up and found her gaze locked with his, and this time, she did not recognize him. It suited him well " she would not have remembered him anyways. Besides, was it not better to start things afresh?

* * *

><p>HAN: Heh heh heh, this is not really related to my new Hakuouki fanfic, "The Quest", but... yeah. It is an interesting take on why Kazama insists on calling Chizuru his wife (or in Japanese, waga tsuma).<p>

A word of thanks to Aogetsu and It'sMyCircusNow for the kind reviews! I hope you will enjoy this one as well!

17. Serendipity

Pairing: Hijikata/Souji/Harada X Chizuru and Takasugi/Katsura/Glover X Kozue

* * *

><p>No matter how one looked at it, the city of Kyoto, at the time of utter madness and bloodshed that they lived in, was a magnificent city, filled with life and all its wonders. One particular wonder of it all, was serendipity. In Japanese, it was known as "enishi", written as "ç·f".<p>

In that one city, many factions struggled for supremacy, factions divided by one single line: those who supported the Bakufu, and those that fought against it in the Emperor's name. Yet, in any given faction, there would always be a charismatic, big-hearted leader, the strong prankster who hid more in his ever-present laughter, and the ever-present, ever-dependable soul that would stay by them in his own way. The Choushu-han and the Shinsen-Gumi were two such factions, even if they knew little about one another, but at the same time, they knew one another well enough as bitter enemies.

Takasugi Shinsaku was the beholder of such a small miracle one afternoon when he was walking the streets of Kyoto, fresh from a wild night in Shimarabara. He was the commander of the Kiheitai, the militia arm of the Choushu-han, effectively the second in command. However, he was not interested in the formalities of his duty that afternoon and decided to roam around the city at his leisure. Surely Katsura, his old friend and leader, would send someone over to hound him into doing work if there was something urgent.

On one such afternoon, he decided to patronize a particular tea-house famous for its dango. Despite his renown in the efforts of overthrowing the Bakufu, no one knew his face, and thus, he was able to move in relative freedom. His dango was served to him within a few minutes of ordering them, and he was about to pick one off its skewer with his teeth when he saw a group of about three men accompanying a pretty young girl into the tea-house.

The girl was more or less Kozue's age, but she was smaller and slighter of build. Unlike Kozue, she did not have the bearing of a warrior, nor did she have Kozue's hidden anger and fury. At one glance, one would even think that the girl would have nothing worth mentioning, but Takasugi knew that for a girl to attract the attentions of warriors like them (all three of the men around her bore two swords, so he assumed that they were samurai of some sort), she must possess her own charms.

They sat at the table next to his. He could hear everything that they said.

"Chizuru-chan, eat as much as you want, all right?" said the man with flaming hair and amber eyes to the girl.

"Heh, heh, it's Sano's treat, after all, so it's alright!" teased another. His tone was mischievous, emerald eyes dancing in the sunlight.

The third harrumphed. Brows furrowed, and arms crossed, he was a stern, strong man. Takasugi could have thought that he was a woman, with such beautiful, long hair that was black as the night, with pieces falling here and there that only accentuated his handsomeness. But then again, Takasugi knew a man who looked just like that as well, albeit with turquoise coloring. "I still don't understand why you dragged me here as well."

The amber-eyed man smiled even wider and gave the stern man a brotherly (but forceful) pat on the back. "Maa, maa, even the Oni-Fukuchou needs a rest from time to time," he said in an undertone, his words only audible to Takasugi because they were seated so closely.

Ah, so the Shinsen-Gumi was off-duty, Takasugi surmised with a grin. He watched the girl, utterly oblivious to the fact that they were fawning over her in their own way, even the infamous Fukuchou, Hijikata Toshizou. His deep, royal purple eyes were fixed on the girl, and there was a small smile on his face when the girl obviously displayed some form of happiness being in their company.

Such a scene reminded him about a time, not too long ago, when he was in such a gathering as well. He had barged into the Choushu-han headquarters in the city and had somehow challenged Katsura to a

drinking match. Surely enough, he had shocked Kozue to no end by barging in and flirtatiously teasing her, but she took it all in stride. There was no doubt that the pretty girl surrounded by the Wolves of Mibu was not free to such a fate with her pack of suitors as well.

"Souji, drink your tea before it gets too cold," Hijikata scolded the emerald-eyed man. "That weird flu of yours is getting more and more out of hand."

Weirdâ€¦ flu? Things were getting interesting indeed, Takasugi mused. He knew his own body, and he too, was showing signs of said weird flu, although it was still early days. He just had a feeling that it would be the same thing, somehow. The mention of the phrase made the girl's brow furrow as well, and the emerald-eyed man chuckled, brushing it off as just what it was, a weird flu.

Knowing that he had intruded in their little gathering for too long, Takasugi paid for his food and went on his way, watching the four of them bicker amongst themselves.

Perhapsâ€¦ their enemy was not too different from them indeed.

It took him about twenty minutes to reach their headquarters, where Kozue had once again made herself a guest there. She was sparring with Katsura, who brought it upon himself to refine her technique, despite her occupation as a kenjutsu instructor, and they were watched by Glover, the British weapons merchant who provided the Choushu-han their weapons.

"Ah, Takasugi-san, what brings that contented smile?" Glover asked him when he took a seat on the veranda next to him.

"Nothing much," Takasugi replied aloud. "Just that I realize that even wolves also revolve around an adorable little girl with the heart of a lioness."

Glover raised a curious eyebrow at Takasugi, but did not probe further. Katsura, however, understood every word, and looked towards Kozue as she started to go through a set of kata unique to the kenjutsu taught in her own family as well.

"Rumor has it that they used to run a shambled dojo in Edo," Katsura added, knowing that Kozue would not hear him in her moment of utter concentration. "They gave it up just to become wolves prowling our fair capital."

"The things we have in common gives me the chills," Takasugi replied.

Ah, it was only then did Glover understand what the two of them were talking about. "Perhaps in a different timeâ€¦"

"Nah, we'd still try to kill one another," Takasugi said with a wide smile. "It's just how things have to be."

* * *

><p>HAN: Hello there, lovely readers! Remember me? I've just finished most of Urakata Hakuouki and I can't help but to write this little

piece because of how... similar the boys from the Choushu-han are to the boys from the Shinsen-Gumi. In case you didn't know what Urakata Hakuouki is, it's basically a retelling of the Bakumatsu from the POV of the Imperialists through the eyes of a new protagonist who finds herself wrapped up in the events of the conflict somewhat in the same fashion as Chizuru. Katsura Kogoro is the leader of the Choushu-han, Takasugi Shinsaku is the leader of the Kiheitai, a subordinate and friend to Katsura, while Glover is a fictional arms dealer. All of them have routes in Urakata Hakuouki, and I've omitted one more character just because I've yet to play his route, heh heh. ^.^ I hope you liked this!<p>

End
file.